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ABSTRACT

The Wahsa Distance Education Centre is operated by the Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC) for Cree and Oji-Cree secondary students living in the 23 remote communities of Sioux Lookout District in northwestern Ontario. Although most communities have locally controlled K-8 schools, very few communities offer secondary education. The NNEC, a Native-run organization, has been mandated by the 23 tribal leaders of Sioux Lookout District to serve the needs of secondary and postsecondary students. In 1990, Indian and Northern Affairs Canada agreed to fund a distance education program that would allow Native students to remain in their communities and attend high school. An advisory board composed of representatives from NNEC, Wawatay Native Communications Society, tribal councils, and four First Nations met regularly to work on program development. Wawatay Native Communications Society agreed to deliver Wahsa's distance education program over its radio network. Communities donated buildings to be used for learning centers, and community members offered to be distance education coordinators and tutors for the program. The program provides radio and correspondence courses for students in grades 9-11, including required subjects and courses in Native culture and language. This paper also discusses effective program delivery methods; areas for program improvement; and plans for program expansion to encompass educational television, increased programming for 12th-grade students, adult education classes, and teacher education courses. (LP)

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# Developing and Implementing A Distance Education Secondary School Program for Isolated First Nation Communities in Northwestern Ontario

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## Introduction

9:10 AM. Snowmobiles roar towards the Adult Learning Centres in 15 communities in Sioux Lookout District, Northwestern Ontario. The Distance Education Co-ordinator is arriving for the day.

9:15 AM. Radio dials are turned to 90.1 FM. A soft upbeat croon swells to an enticing chorus:

> And we're waiting for the right time;
> Won't you call us right now.
> Yes we're waiting for the right time;
> Wahsa's your dreams come true. -------

AVAILABLE

An elder from a different community each morning offers thanks for this new opportunity at learning, and asks a blessing for Wahsa students and staff. The announcer explains that Wahsa Distance Education Centre is a program of Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC), offered over FM radio through Wawatay Native Communications Society, which broadcasts to 43 isolated native communities in northern and Northwestern Ontario.

> "Good morning. Here are the Wahsa announcements for Monday, December 10. It is Week 14 on the school calendar".

Another day of radio classes for Wahsa Distance Education students has begun.

## Background

Wahsa is an Oji-Cree word meaning "far away". Or, as one adamant believer has translated—"far out." The program is well named!

The classroom for 1990-91, our initial year of operation, is 200,000 square km. of bush and semi tundra where 15,000 Cree and Oji-Cree live in 23 isolated communities ranging in population from 38 to 1500 people. While nearly all of the communities have federally funded locally controlled schools from Kindergarten to Grade 8, only three offer programs at the grade 9 and 10 level.

In the majority of the Sioux Lookout District communities, teenagers must leave home at the age of 14, travel south by plane to live with strangers in a home where their language is not spoken, and attend a school which invariably has more students than the entire community from which these adolescents have emerged.

For some, this system has worked. For most, it has been a dismal failure. The Northern Nishnawbe Education Council (NNEC), a native run organization, has the mandate from the 23 area Chiefs to serve the needs of all secondary and post-secondary students in the communities in Sioux Lookout District. NNEC places approximately 400 secondary students in southern homes each year. Half of the grade 9 students do not complete their year. Half of those returning the following year drop out during grade 10. The pattern is repeated until by the end of Grade 12. Only 10% of the students graduate. In June, 1990, statistics showed that in the 23 communities that NNEC serves, 900 adolescents between the ages of 14-19 remained in their home communities,

unschooled. For the generations of adults who have preceded them, the schooling statistics are even worse.

**Related Area Distance Education Area Initiatives**

By the autumn of 1989, a variety of distance education programs had established themselves in Northwestern Ontario. These became models on which Wahsa could build a system to meet the needs of the students in Sioux Lookout District. They included the following:

1. Contact North had developed a distance education network throughout Northwestern Ontario using convenors, telewriters, computer conferencing and fax machines to facilitate communication. They had supplied expertise, some technical equipment, and bridge facilities, along with a Native Liaison Officer to introduce the concept to northern First Nations.

2. Windigó Education, a department of Windigo Tribal Council, serving several area First Nations had used the Contact North system to offer an extensive program of professional development through teleconferencing for teachers and support staff of Windigo Affiliated locally controlled schools. Some sessions had been combined with other area First Nations schools. Networking had proven especially beneficial for education counsellors, classroom assistants, and language instructors who work in isolation from their counterparts in other communities.

3. Independent Learning Centre (ILC) Access Site. ILC, the Correspondence Program of the Ontario Ministry of Education, had agreed to an Access Site in Sioux Lookout. This meant that rather than having students send their correspondence lessons to Toronto for marking, students could fax their applications to a Centre in Sioux Lookout, send their lessons to Sioux Lookout area teachers for marking, and in the process reduce the "turn-around" time from nearly a month to two weeks.

4. Dryden District School Board, the provincial school board serving students in Sioux Lookout, had offered a co-operative program between small high schools in adjacent towns with each school offering one course through teleconferencing to both locations.

5. Wawatay Native Communications Society, the well established, native run Communications Network, offered 4 hours of live radio programming daily in the native language, weekly television broadcasts in the native language, and a biweekly bilingual newspaper. With its mandate of retaining the native language and culture, it was interested in expanding its services, especially in the native language.

6. Lakehead School Board in Thunder Bay was supplying secondary school credit courses through a joint project with Indian and Northern Affairs Canada (INAC) and Thunder Bay area First Nations. They were using Contact North Distance Education equipment to deliver programs.

7. Northern Lights School Board in Moosonee, Ontario was offering a parallel program to First Nations communities in the James Bay area.

8. The Seine River Adult Learning Centre near Atikokan, Northwestern Ontario, featured a Contact North site with teleconferencing for Distance Education courses, a library, ILC access site, and on-site instruction. It provided a suitable model for northern First Nations to create a suitable Learning Centre for receiving Wahsa programming.

9. Lakehead University and Confederation College in Thunder Bay were two of many post-secondary institutions across the country offering courses through Distance Education. Confederation College offered a General Vocational Program (GVP) through teleconferencing for adult students requiring upgrading in order to enter college courses.

**The Process of Wahsa Programming Development**

In November of 1989, representatives from pertinent organizations met to share ideas and discuss possibilities for a Distance Education alternative for the remote northern students. People gathered from Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, Windigo Tribal Council, Shibogama Tribal Council, Independent First Nations Alliance, Wawatay Native Communications Society, Contact North (Provincial Distance Education), Ministry of Education (ILC Correspondence Courses), Indian and Northern Affairs Canada, District and Region, Dryden Board of Education (serving Sioux Lookout residents), and interested First Nations. It was agreed to have the native organizations draft a proposal. After further meetings and approval from the group the proposal was submitted to Indian and Northern Affairs Canada for pre-implementation funding.

In March, 1990, INAC accepted the proposal and quickly provided initial funding, making feasible a target operational date of September, 1990. An Advisory Board composed of representatives from Northern Nishnawbe Education Council, Wawatay Native Communications Society, the Tribal Councils, and four First Nations met regularly to advise on and approve the plans as they proceeded. The project would repeatedly shift and shunt with the prevailing political winds, and then would move forward again.

Contact North had been the distance education system promoted as an equalizer of opportunity for native people in the province. Contact North had initially supported the pre-implementation phase of the Wahsa program with advice, basic distance education equipment to participating communities, and use of networking facilities. However, it became clear that the governing structure of Contact North would not support equal access to the Contact North Delivery System for Wahsa programming unless Wahsa was affiliated with a Provincial School Board. There was no indication from the native organizations involved that this step would meet their needs. NNEC agreed to accept Wahsa as one of its programs. INAC agreed to provide funding for the program.

Wawatay Native Communications Society agreed to deliver Wahsa programs over its radio network. The decision to use Wawatay Native Communications Radio link as a delivery system was made for political, logistical and financial reasons. Wahsa would not be allowed to use Contact North system on a first-come, first-serve basis. Moreover, the Contact North system is undependable in the North as it depends on telephone lines that are inadequate, unreliable, and cost-ineffective. By July of 1990, the plan for using Wawatay Radio Network had solidified. The decision was made to proceed with this untried delivery system.

NNEC applied for Private School Status for Wahsa with the province of Ontario. At that point, the program was on its way.

**The Outcome**

Wahsa maintains its accountability to the communities it serves in a variety of ways:

*Local Feedback*. There is constant feedback from students, distance education Co-ordinators, Local Education Authorities (who are most often responsible for the program at the community level), and Chiefs and Councils. Open

communication is considered paramount to molding the program to meet the needs of the participants.

*NNEC Working Group*. Wahsa reports regularly to the Director of Education at NNEC, and to the NNEC Board of Directors (presently known as the working group) who are supportive in constructive suggestions on improvement for the program.

*Wahsa Advisory Committee*. Because of the overload of responsibilities placed on the NNEC Working Group, an additional Advisory Committee is in the developmental stages. It will consist of educators from the NNEC Working Group, NNEC Senior Management Staff, Wawatay, and four communities who utilize Wahsa most heavily. It will make recommendations on course selection and content, textbook selection, delivery methodologies, and will be a constant source of feedback on the progress of the program.

There is a shortage of adequate buildings of all types in Sioux Lookout District First Nation communities. Houses are traditionally in short supply, of inferior quality, with no running water, and sometimes with no hydro. Federal school construction is at least 10 years behind requirements. In 15 of the 23 communities, there are no school gymnasiums, libraries, shops, science labs, or computer rooms. In five communities, there is no school at all. There is certainly no room for adult students who want to start or resume a high school education.

Wahsa is a community-based program. The acquisition, furnishing, and maintenance of the local Learning Centre has became a community initiative. Provincial ministries were approached to support the establishment of Learning Centres in participating Wahsa communities. To date (1990) they have not responded.

First Nations interested in the Wahsa program designated a building for the Adult Learning Centre. The easiest building to obtain and renovate is an old house. The living room becomes the radio/convenor room; bedrooms become small group session areas and individual study carrels. The support and desire for Wahsa programming has become most evident through the community efforts in creating an Adult Learning Centre that is warm, attractive, and inviting. Education is beginning to be recognized as a priority. The Learning Centre has become a focal point for the new thrust on life long learning.

In addition to a building, the community provides a distance education co-ordinator, a person who organizes the logistics of the operation, as well as tutors and students, or helps the students in obtaining the help needed. These

people are the eyes of the teachers, and are crucial to the success of the program.

Wawatay Native Communications Society is a well-established, native-run communications organization, serving the entire Nishnawbe-Aski (Treaty #9) area covering 200,000 square miles, including 44 communities from Timmins, Ontario on the East and James Bay coast on the north to the Ontario-Manitoba Border on the west and Thunder Bay area on the south. Its FM signal is broadcast via a TV Ontario Audio Subcarrier on Anik C, and can be received from Kentucky to Newfoundland.

Wawatay's mandate is to increase communication links across this vast district, and to assist in maintaining and propagating the use of native language and culture in the area. From its main broadcast studios in Sioux Lookout, and its secondary studio in Moose Factory, it provides the following:

1. FM native language radio programming daily: 4 hours;

2. television programming weekly:
   - 1 hour of news, tradition, and general interest;
   - 1 hour of youth programming;
   - 1/2 hour of children's programming;

3. newspaper; bimonthly in English and Oji-Cree syllabics;

4. HF trail radios for trappers: as required;

5. language services including translation and adaption of English to Indian;

6. desktop publishing; and

7. market research.

The Wawatay Radio system has proven to be far superior to other alternatives in meeting Wahsa needs. What was initially perceived to be a risk has turned into a substantial asset.

Independent Learning Centre (ILC) is the Ontario Ministry of Education's link to distance education through correspondence. The recent trend has been to decentralize distribution of materials and teacher markers in local store-front or access centres. Wahsa had been designated as an access site

both for all residents of Sioux Lookout, and for surrounding communities, including all the area First Nations early in the implementation process. This step has given credibility to NNEC as a deliverer of programs to non-native residents. In addition, it has meant close liaison with the Independent Learning Centre in creating programs that are more meaningful for northern students.

**The Program**

Wahsa offers two kinds of courses: a) Radio courses and b) Wahsa IL (Independent Learning) correspondence courses.

Each has advantages; each supplies different options for the students. Radio courses are considered to be preferable to IL courses because they provide more structure for the students; there is direct (radio or telephone) contact with the students; and the materials are created for native learners and presented, where possible, reflecting native learning styles. For some students, Wahsa IL courses are more suitable because they do not require attendance at specific time sessions; they are continuous entry courses; and students work at their own pace.

Courses offered that are "compulsory" in the Ontario Ministry guidelines are broadcast day and evening. Smaller demand courses are offered either day or evening.

**Courses offered**

1. Radio.

   a. Regular radio courses. This past semester, Wahsa has offered 8 courses over radio at the general level. They include:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Oji-Cree | Grade 10 | Mathematics | Grades 9, 10, 11 |
| Ojibway | Grade 10 | English | Grades 9, 10, 11 |

In the second semester of the 1990-91 school year, Wahsa will offer over radio:

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Oji-Cree | Grade 11 | Geography | Grade 9 |
| Native Studies | Grade 10 | Science | Grade 9, 10 |
| Mathematics | Grade 10 | Computer | Grade 10 |
| Bookkeeping | Grade 10 | Consumer Studies | Grade 10 |
| Art | Grade 9 | Chemistry | Grade 11 |
| Accounting | Grade 11 | Guidance | Grade 11 |
| English | Grade 12 | | |
| People of Native Ancestry | Grade 11 | | |
| English (Writer's Craft) | Grade 10-11 | | |

b. Adapted correspondence courses. The latter group of courses introduce a new variable, as they use packaged lesson materials from the Ontario Ministry of Education Correspondence Branch (Independent Learning Centre). These materials will be adapted to meet the needs of the native learners.

2. Wahsa IL Courses.

These use Ontario Ministry of Education Correspondence courses. Wahsa offers an enhanced correspondence featuring:

a. immediate delivery of course materials;

b. area teacher markers;

c. extensive phone tutoring services;

d. fast turn-around time for marked papers.

**The Wahsa Delivery System**

Most teachers broadcast from the local Wawatay studio. However three teachers are presently residing in the northern communities. They telephone into Wawatay, and do their classes live in a similar manner to those presenting in town.

There are 4 in-watts lines to the radio studio. Students can phone in questions. Teachers can request specific students or communities to phone in at specific times.

Students are requested to attend their classes at the Learning Centre; however, that is not a hard and fast rule, and some students listen in from home for a variety of reasons.

Once a week, materials are transported via local airlines to the students. In return, lessons for marking are sent by air to the Wahsa centre in Sioux Lookout.

**Variables Utilized at Present**

In order to discover effective methods of program delivery, a number of variables have been employed. They include the following:

1. Full-time and part-time staff have been used because some subject areas (Oji-Cree, Ojibway) could not support a full-time person. For certain staff members who had home or other responsibilities this suited them; it suited the program well too.

2. Staff at a distance were utilized because

   a. two staff members are permanent residents of the north and would not consider a position unless they could remain in their home community;

   b. one staff member was hired as the part-time Distance Education Co-ordinator. Having him on Wahsa teaching staff complemented all that was being developed in that community's distance education program.

   This has been one of the most difficult variables with which to deal, as it has hampered communication among staff members severely. In theory, it should be possible to have teachers located in any area of the country. In reality, at least for the first year of operation, it is desirable to have them centrally located so that intensive collaboration can occur. However, this has to be weighed beside the desirability of having native teachers on staff.

3. Back-up markers: Due to late registrations, and difficulty in the initial year of operation of forecasting accurate student numbers, one teacher ended up with a total of 160 students in two courses. Wahsa hired a teacher-marker to facilitate the marking. Although the people involved collaborated well, it was not as effective a system as having the on-air teacher mark his/her own students' assignments.

4. Trained teacher as Distance Education Co-ordinator: One community chose to hire a non-native teacher to assume the role of Distance Education Co-ordinator, feeling that a trained tutor would be beneficial to the success of the program. While statistical analysis has not been completed, there is no indication that this has been a strong asset or liability to the program.

**Student/Teacher Interaction**

Student support is achieved through on-air discussion and questioning; teacher follow-up to specific Learning Centres, and specific students; weekly forms completed by students indicating what materials they have included for marking, and any areas where they require assistance; regularly scheduled times where the teacher is available for telephone tutoring; some community visits by teachers.

**Challenges**

As the introductory flaws get removed from the program, additional areas requiring improvement become apparent.

*Increase in on-air student/teacher contact:* Initially, students were not reticent in speaking on air with their teachers. Recently, it has become more challenging to get on air student participation. Wahsa staff members are constantly searching for methods of attaining this contact, or alternative methods of achieving a similar effect.

*Support from Provincial Ministries:* Although Wahsa is not a Provincial Board of Education, Wahsa students will eventually enrol in provincial programs. It behooves the province to facilitate the students and staff in

1. creating academically acceptable programming;

2. providing access to distance education equipment, facilities, and expertise similar to those provided to provincial school boards offering parallel programs to First Nation communities; networking and sharing distance education initiatives.

3. Wahsa has much to offer in determining meaningful programming for First Nation students. Wahsa provides a suitable forum for pilot projects. It is prepared to share its expertise and knowledge with secondary or

post-secondary institutions who also desire creative programs meeting the needs of isolate students.

## Plans for the Future

### Distance Education Co-ordinator Training

It is becoming increasingly evident that the Local Distance Education Co-ordinators play a pivotal role in the success of the Wahsa program. In January, 1991, Wahsa hosted a training workshop for the Co-ordinators. The information shared enhanced the weekly staff meetings that are held on air as a support to these very special people.

### Uplink Television

In September of 1990, Wawatay received the first up-link television in northwestern Ontario. Live television broadcast to the Wahsa communities began in September, 1991. Wahsa will take advantage of this opportunity to enrich its audio programming with periodic televised classes.

### Increased Radio Programming

By September, 1990, Wahsa expanded its radio course offerings to include grade 12. There is also a need for courses at an academically advanced level for those who wish to pursue a niversity education.

## Visions for the Future

### Learning Centre Development

There is a need for Learning Centres to be more than the renovated past; they are the essence of the future. Those who believe in innovation and sustainable community development will quickly recognize the potential of this system. It will be a sound investment to support First Nations in developing fully equipped Learning Centres that magnify the goal of education as life long learning.


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**Potential Expansion of Programs**

There is a need for effective programming for the north in the following areas:

1. Upgrading for adults not academically ready for secondary school courses;

2. Certificate courses for teachers, classroom assistants, and education counsellors; and

3. On the job training for First Nation personnel such as Band Administrators, Economic Development officers, Outreach workers, Child and Family Workers, Drug and Alcohol Workers.

4. Professional Development for teachers, nurses, etc.

5. Networking and sharing for those working in isolation such as community health workers, social assistance administrators, native language instructors, Airport Maintenance workers etc.

Wahsa will be approaching the First Nations to have them identify their priorities in expanding the current programming areas.

## Conclusion

A recent phone call reflects the intensity of the desire and the difficulty of the task. A student shared the following with her teacher:

> "I'm way behind on my assignments, but please please don't drop me from the course. I went to the Band Office today and said I was quitting my job so that I could get caught up, and they said, 'you can't, we need you'. It is even harder here than in the other Wahsa communities. We have only one phone, and it is connected directly to the wall, so that we can not have a convenor to speak with you over the air. We have no airstrip, and freeze-up is coming, and we will not be able to get materials in and out to you for a month. I am the only one taking this course, and my friend who supports me flew out yesterday with her sick baby. We have no hydro, and so we are using kerosene lamps; this makes reading difficult. And the calculators that you sent us are solar operated, and I am standing here with a flashlight over it to make it work."

We sent another calculator! And she is still enroled in the course!

Wahsa is symbolic of its students. Wahsa has encountered a harsh environment, and has learned to manoeuvre within it. Wahsa has taken the technology and course content of southern programs and molded and shaped it to fit northern students' needs. With a little time, Wahsa will emerge as a strong alternative for students who choose to make the north their home.